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ABSTRACT

Even though rape is the crime they fear most, women hold strong beliefs that their personal risk for sexual victimization is lower than the risk for other women. Victimization shatters illusions of invulnerability, and results in feelings of vulnerability, suggesting that sexual victimization should decrease women's perceived invulnerability for future sexual victimization. This study discusses these relationships in the context of a longitudinal study, in which 395 women provided data on the impact of sexual victimization (attempted or completed rape) on changes across one year in the perceived likelihood of experiencing a sexual assault. Analyses reveal a lower perceived likelihood of assault by a stranger was greater than by an acquaintance, but at time two, the relationship was reversed. Furthermore, at time one there were no differences in the two groups' reported likelihood of either experiencing future nonsexual crimes/accidents or encountering health problems, but at time two, women who had been sexually victimized showed a significant increase in their reported likelihood of both types of misfortunes. These results held even when controlling for victimization experiences occurring prior to the first assessment. Finally, not only did victimization change perceptions of risk, but also changed various aspects of victims' interpersonal behavior and mental health. Contains seven graphs and tables. (Author)

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Victimization status and perceived risk of sexual assault: Longitudinal analyses

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Even though rape is the crime they fear most, women hold strong beliefs that their personal risk for sexual victimization is lower than the risk for other women. Theorists have postulated that victimization shatters illusions of invulnerability, and results in feelings of vulnerability for a range of misfortunes, suggesting that sexual victimization should decrease women's perceived invulnerability for future sexual victimization.

The present paper discusses these relationships in the context of a longitudinal study, in which 395 women provide data on the impact of sexual victimization (attempted or completed rape) on changes across one year in the perceived likelihood of experiencing a sexual assault. Analyses reveal a lower perceived likelihood of sexual assault by an acquaintance than by a stranger at both time one and time two for women who did not experience a sexual assault between the two assessments. However, for women who were sexually assaulted, their perceptions changed from time one to time two; at time one, their perceived likelihood of assault by a stranger was greater than by an acquaintance, but at time two, the relationship was reversed. Furthermore, at time one there were no differences in the two groups' reported likelihood of either experiencing future nonsexual crimes/accidents or encountering health problems, but at time two, women who had been sexually victimized showed a significant increase in their reported likelihood of both types of misfortunes. These results held even when controlling for victimization experiences occurring prior to the first assessment. Finally, not only did victimization change perceptions of risk, but also changed various aspects of victims' interpersonal behavior and mental health; it is these latter changes that may mediate between victimization and perceived future risk.

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Victimization status and perceived risk of sexual assault:

Longitudinal analyses

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Even though rape is the crime women fear most, they hold strong beliefs that their personal risk for sexual victimization is lower than the risk for other women. As Karlee Hoecker reported in an earlier presentation (Hoecker & White, 1995), the perception of invulnerability is greater for acquaintance sexual assault than stranger sexual assault. She also reported that past experience with an assault dampened the sense of invulnerability. Theorists have postulated that victimization shatters illusions of invulnerability, and results in feelings of vulnerability for a range of misfortunes, suggesting that sexual victimization should decrease women's perceived invulnerability for future mishaps (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Perloff, 1983). The present paper discusses these relationships in the context of a longitudinal study, in which 322 women provided data on the impact of sexual victimization (verbally coerced sexual intercourse, attempted or completed rape) on changes across one year in the perceived likelihood of experiencing a number of misfortunes.

These data were collected as part of a five-year longitudinal investigation of sexual assault experiences spanning adolescence through four years of college. The data reported today come from surveys administered at the end of the second and third years of college. **Overhead 1** briefly describes the types and frequency of sexual assault experiences the women in the survey have experienced.

Overhead 2 describes the design used to generate data presented today. At Time 1 (actually the end of the college women's second year in college), we determined the young women's victimization status. All women who had experienced verbally coerced sexual intercourse, attempted rape, or rape, as assessed by the Koss

Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) were categorized as having prior experience with sexual assault. At this time, the women also were asked to indicated, using a 5-point scale, their chances of each of a number of misfortunes occurring to them. In addition to assessing the chances of being sexually assaulted by an acquaintance or date and being sexually assaulted by a stranger, 10 additional events were included. Factor analyses revealed that these items represented two reliable sets of misfortunes, accidents (including auto accident, purse snatched, residential break-in, being physically harmed, a=.80) and health-related problems (including developing a drinking problem, contacting a STD, obesity, having a nervous breakdown, and being placed on academic probation, a=.63).

At time 2, sexual victimization experiences during the third year of college were assessed, again using the Koss SES. In addition, the likelihood of the various misfortunes were reassessed (for Accidents factor, a=.81; for Health factor, a=.59). To analyze the data, a series of multivariate analyses of variance using prior victimization status and current victimization status as between subject variables, and time as a within subjects variable, were performed. The likelihood of sexual assault by an acquaintance, sexual assault by a stranger, and average likelihood ratings for the accident items and health-related items were the dependent variables.

Several hypotheses were advanced and supported:

1. Perceptions of vulnerability to stranger assault are greater than perceptions of vulnerability to acquaintance assault (**Overhead 3**).

2. Prior victimization history will be associated with greater perceived vulnerability to acquaintance and stranger assault than no prior history (**Overhead 3**)--what appears to be a history by acquaintanceship interaction is not statistically significant.

3. Current assault status will result in a greater perception of vulnerability, especially for acquaintance assault (**Overhead 4**)--this shows an assault status by acquaintanceship interaction. that is, current assault status alters perceptions of risk for acquaintance assault, but not for stranger assault.

4. Sexual victimization between time 1 and time 2 will result in an increased perception of vulnerability to future sexual assault, especially by an acquaintance. More striking is the finding that the absence of a current assault was associated with a decrease in the perception of risk of both stranger and

acquaintance assault, especially for acquaintance assault (**Overhead 5**).

5. With regard to perceptions of risk for other misfortunes, the results revealed that when prior victimization is taken into account, current assault status resulted in greater perceived risks for accidents and health-related problems, and that these perceptions did not change significantly from time 1 to time 6. Prior victimization history was related significantly to perceived risk of future health problems, but not to risks of future accidents (**Overhead 6**).

It should be noted that this is a sample of fairly well-functioning young women; given that they have successfully completed three years of college there is a high likelihood of college graduation. Thus, it is not surprising that their overall ratings of risk were on the low (or unlikely) end of the rating scale. In spite of this, the effects of prior and current sexual victimization on perceptions of vulnerability were still apparent. One of the most striking findings is that women with sexual assault experiences appear to realize that assault by an acquaintance is more likely than do women without sexual assault experiences. This finding is certainly consistent with previous research and theory. Future research is needed to verify this pattern of results in a younger and more diverse sample of women, who are in fact at greater risk for sexual assault than were the women at the time they provided the data reported here.

Other aspects of our data (White & Humphrey, 1993), as well as the research of others (Wyatt, Guthrie, & Notgrass, 1992), supports the conclusion that past victimization is the best predictor of future victimization, and that victimization is greater among younger than older women (**Overhead 7**). Hence, most of the women in our sample have made it through the first 20-21 years of their lives relatively unscathed by sexual assault. This perhaps explains the significant decrease among non-victimized women from time 1 to time 2 in their perceptions of risk for sexual assault: "If it hasn't happened in the past, it is unlikely that it will happen in the future."

What is of concern is the impact on precautionary behaviors of the realization of either a) the possibility of future assault among victimized women, or b) the perception of invulnerability among non-victimized women on precautionary behaviors. Research questions yet to be answered include what, if any, are differences in precautionary behaviors of victimized and non victimized women?

On the one hand, women with perceptions of invulnerability may actually increase their risk because they do not engage in precautionary behaviors. Additionally, as Perloff (1983) argued, "illusions of invulnerability prior to victimization may make actual misfortune all the more difficult to cope with. And, after victimization, those who perceive themselves as 'uniquely vulnerable' may show lower self-esteem, harsher self-criticism, and greater depression, and may have more difficulty reestablishing a sense of personal security, than victims who perceive themselves as 'universally vulnerable'" (p. 56).

On the other hand, Heath and Davidson (1988) noted that women who believe rape can happen are more fearful and anxious, and, particularly if they believe rape is uncontrollable, may actually do less to keep themselves safe. As Hill and Zautra (1989) have reported, "women who feel more likely than other women to be raped in the future have more difficulties with certain psychological problems such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness" (p. 373). Is it possible that these psychological problems actually contribute to an increased likelihood of victimization.

The present results suggest that treatment programs for victims should include focus on perceptions of vulnerability for future mishaps; and, prevention/intervention efforts must take both past history and perceptions of invulnerability into account.

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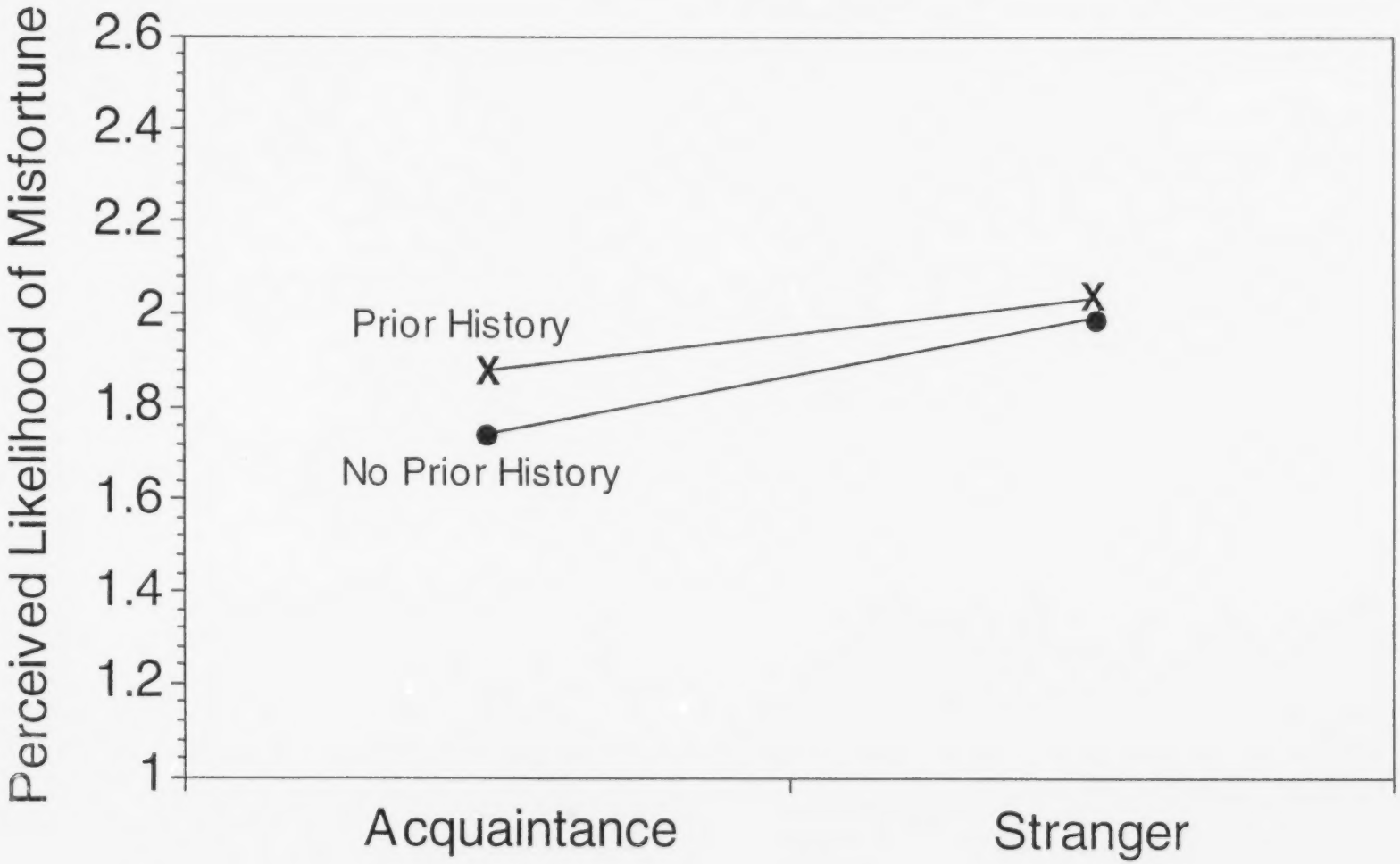
Pattern of Sexual Victimization (%)

Type of Assault		During College		
	Adolescence	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year
None	50.4	55.8	71.0	73.5
Unwanted Contact	12.4	8.6	8.2	6.0
Verbally Coerced Intercourse	16.3	10.4	13.8	13.3
Attempted Rape	8.1	3.7	2.5	3.4
Rape	12.8	7.2	4.5	3.8
N	835	716	596	498

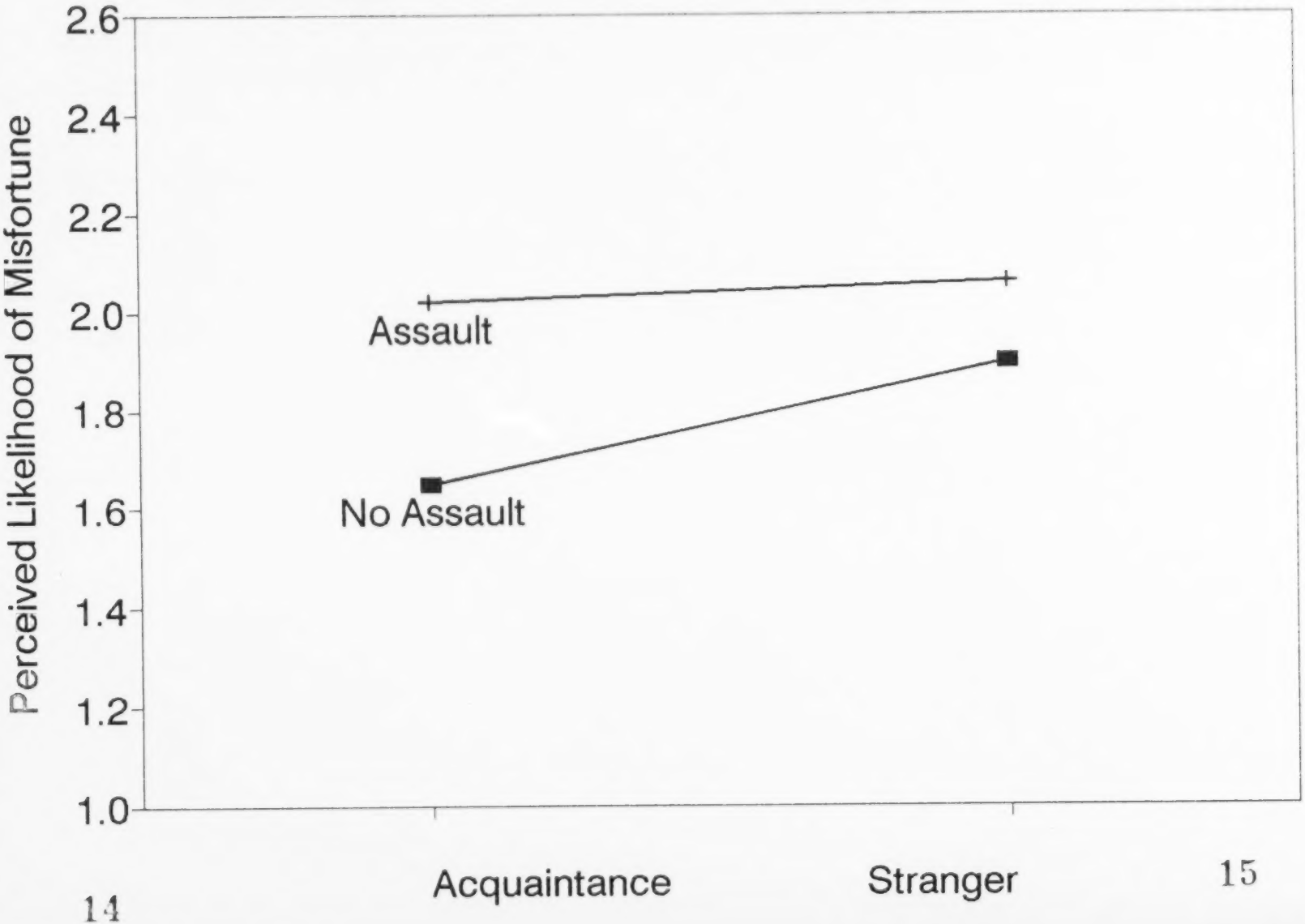
Study Design

Time 1	(1 year)	Time 2
Assessment of sexual assault history (adolescence thru 2nd of year college)		Assessment of sexual assault (during 3rd year of college)
Absent = 167		Absent = 257
Present = 159		Present = 69
Assessment of Likelihood of Misfortune:		Reassessment of Likelihoods
Sexual assault by acquaintance Sexual assault by stranger Accidents Health-related problems		

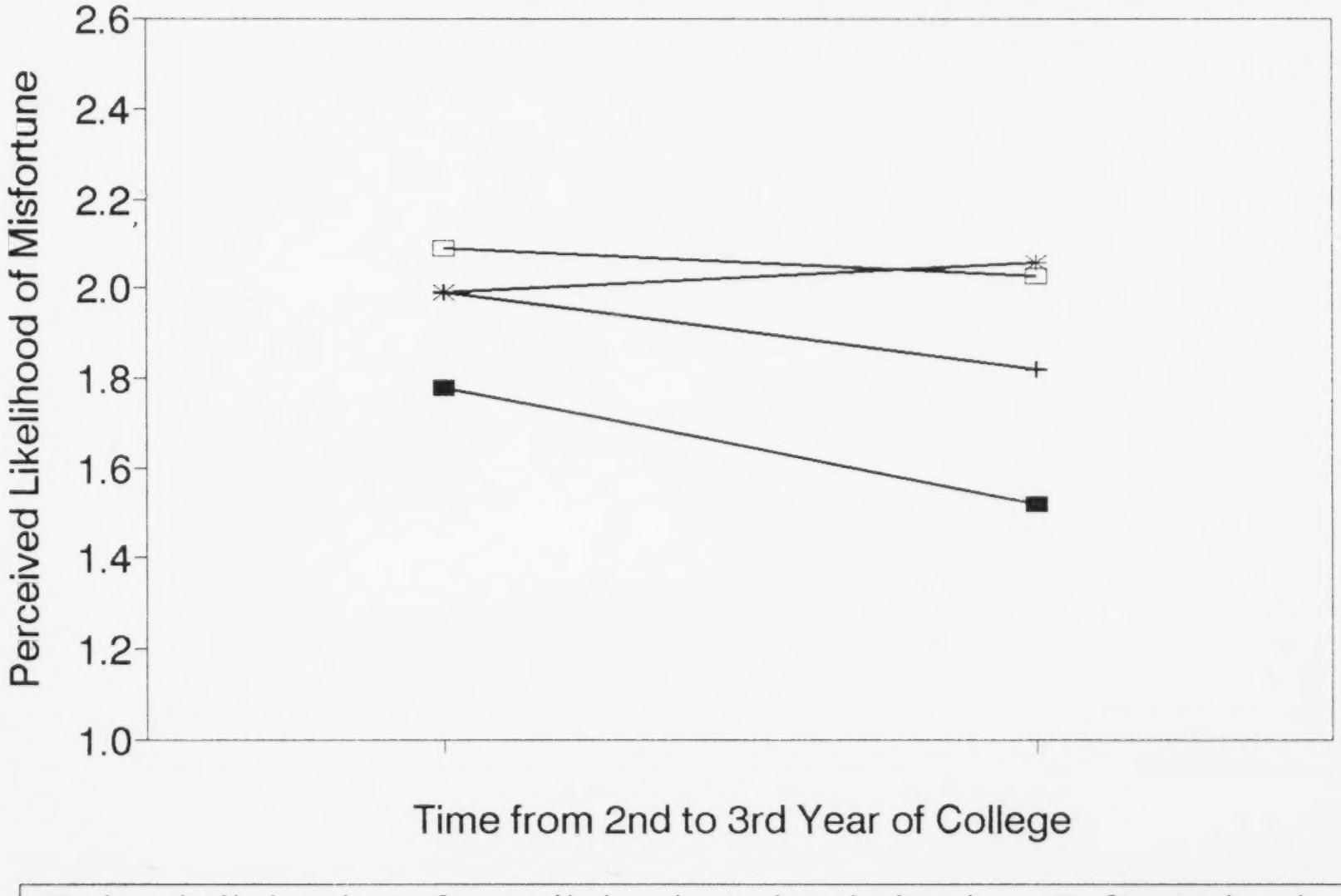
Risk Perception for Sexual Assault by Acquaintanceship and Prior Assault Status



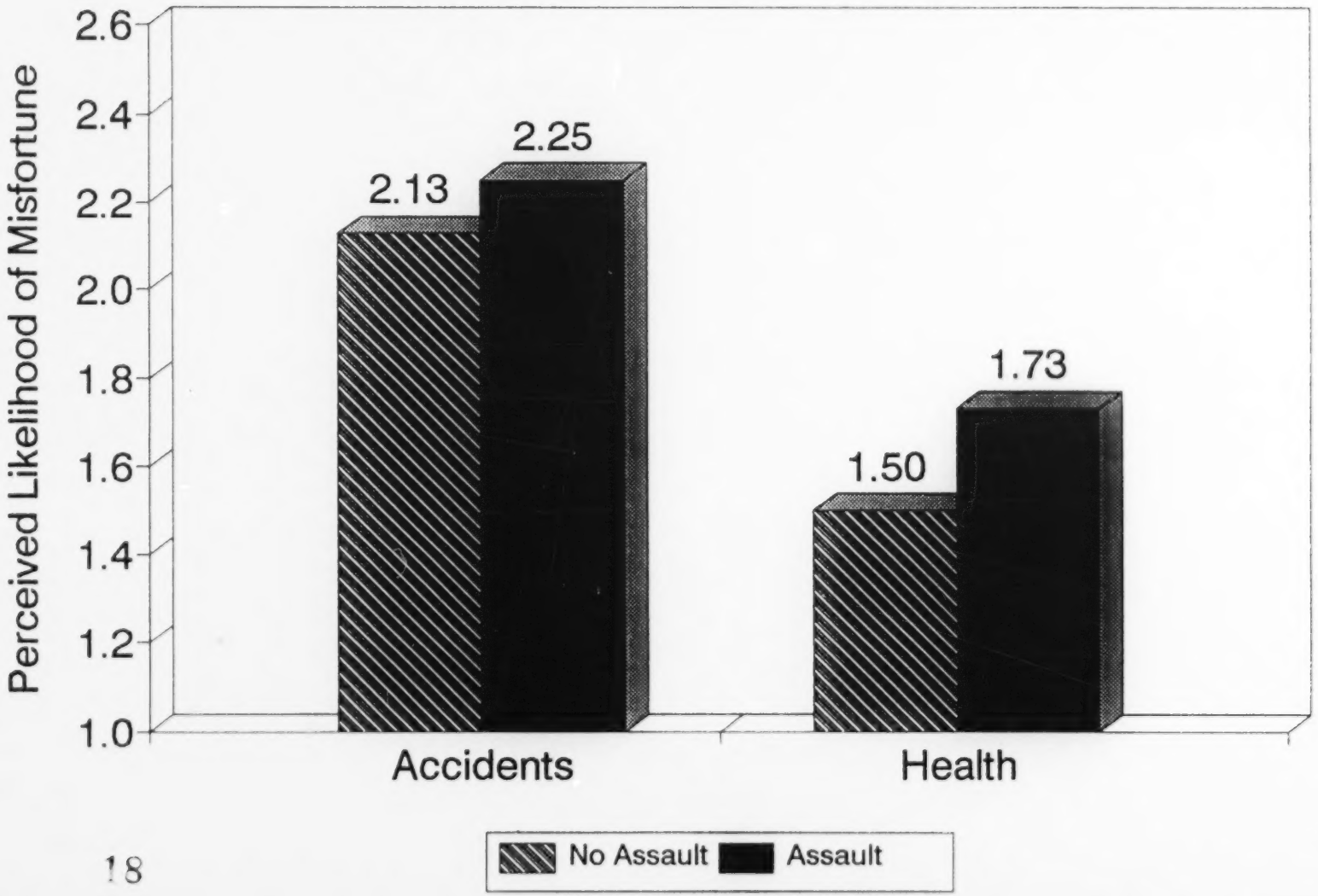
Risk Perception for Sexual Assault by Acquaintanceship and Assault Status



Risk Perception for Sexual Assault by Acquaintanceship and Time



Risk Perceptions of Misfortunes Controlling for Prior Victimization



Pattern of Victimization in 3rd Year Sample (%)

Type	No Prior Assault History	Assault History
None	89.7	57.0
Unwanted Contact	3.5	8.4
Verbally Coerced Sexual Intercourse	4.6	19.6
Attempted Rape	1.2	7.5
Rape	1.2	7.5
N	173	107